

Harbour porpoise

Wadden Sea

The Harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) is the only species of cetacean that lives in the Wadden Sea (De la Vega, 2016; Jensen et al., 2017). According to Santos et al., harbour porpoise feed on fish, cephalopods and crustaceans (2004). Among fish species, harbour porpoise prefer sandeels (*Ammodytes sp.*) and gadoids (Santos et al., 2004). Harbour porpoises search for prey using a narrow-beam, narrow-band, high-frequency sonar, consistent with foraging close to either the sea surface or the bottom (Santos et al., 2004).



History/ Population trends

Harbour porpoise were hunted extensively by humans in the 19th century (Lockyer & Kinze, 2003). Information on distribution derived from historical catch data, from Denmark, with a total of about 100,000 animals taken in Little Belt alone and 40,000 from Isefjord area in the 19th century. However, no reliable data was found on numbers caught in the Wadden Sea area. According to Jensen et al., this is because Harbour porpoises in the Wadden Sea are believed to be part of a large North Sea population and therefore, it is not biologically meaningful to estimate abundance in the Wadden Sea alone (2017).

On the other hand, seasonal patterns in numbers of the population can be observed (Jensen et al., 2017). In the German North Sea EEZ, in May 2005 harbour porpoise abundance was estimated at 64,506 animals (95 % C.I. = 36,776-127,036) and in summer 2006, an estimate of 51,551 animals (95 % CI = 27,879-98,910) was obtained, while the lowest estimates were obtained in autumn (e.g., 11,573 animals in October/ November 2005)(Jensen et al., 2017). This is an increase since the first survey in 1997 (Jensen et al., 2017).

Miscellaneous

- Harbour porpoise are the smallest species within the infraorder of cetacea (Gaskin et al., 1974) The recorded maximum for length and weight are 186cm and 90kg, whereas the average length and weight are about 150cm to 160cm and 45kg to 60kg (Gaskin et al., 1974).
- The name porpoise finds its roots in Latin as 'porcus piscus', which closely translates to pigfish (Santos & Pierce, 2003). The scientific name *Phocoena phocoena* is also derived from Latin, being the Latin word 'phokia'(which means seal) (Santos & Pierce, 2003). This is because the Harbour porpoise lacks a beak and is seal-like appearance (according Linnaeus). *Phocoena phocoena* therefore quite literally means 'sealwhale sealwhale' (Santos & Pierce, 2003).
- Harbour porpoise can dive to a depth of about 90m and hold their breath for about 5 minutes per dive (Otani et al., 1998).

Sources

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